



Art and Identity: The Rise of a New Buddhist Imagery

Author(s): Gary Michael Tartakov

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Art Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 4, New Approaches to South Asian Art (Winter, 1990), pp. 409-416

Published by: [College Art Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/777143>

Accessed: 07/11/2012 03:27

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



College Art Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Art Journal*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Art and Identity: The Rise of a New Buddhist Imagery

By Gary Michael Tartakov

*If you want to gain self-respect, change your religion.
If you want to create a cooperating society, change your religion.
If you want power, change your religion.
If you want equality, change your religion.*

—B. R. Ambedkar

While Buddhism arose in India and was an important religion in the history of the subcontinent, its adherents at the time of Indian Independence in 1947 were few. Indeed, the faith at that time was practiced by only a small group of Tibetans located in the Himalayas. Yet by the efforts of an extraordinary individual, B. R. Ambedkar, the religion has experienced a remarkable upsurge in the last thirty-five years. The architecture and pictorial imagery adopted by this new Buddhist movement reveal a process by which ancient symbols have been reinterpreted and given meaning in a new and a different social context.¹

The faith's success at the time of the historical Buddha (ca. 560–480 B.C.E.) and its resurgence in the twentieth century have hinged in part upon its heterodox approach to the Indian problems of caste and rebirth. Unlike brahmanical Hinduism, it rejects caste distinctions and the karma theory of a soul that is reborn and predestined to live out a life determined by its previous actions. A person's value is measured by current actions and not by the caste into which she or he is born. In ancient India, Buddhism was common among the lowest socioeconomic groups that experienced discrimination by high-caste Hindus.

Buddhism virtually vanished within India following the twelfth century, by which time it had taken root in Central Asia, China, Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia.² During the period of British colonization, India's largely disused and ruined Buddhist monuments were explored. By the middle of the twentieth century a good many Buddhist shrines had been uncovered, restored, and placed under the natural protection of the Archaeological Survey. Among these are a number of India's most world-renowned monuments, such as

the great *stūpa* memorial at Sanchi and the painted monastic halls of Ajanta, visited by pilgrims from around the world and treated in the standard survey texts of world art.

B. R. Ambedkar was born on April 14, 1891, in Maharashtra in western India. By the time of his death on December 6, 1956, Maitreya Ambedkar—as he has come to be known by some—succeeded in bringing Buddhism back to the land of its origins. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism was largely a response to his birth into an untouchable family of the Mahar community in Maharashtra. In the nineteenth century Mahars were “village servants,” mostly landless laborers, outside the castes acceptable to Hindus. Ambedkar was thus among the one-seventh to one-fifth of India's population condemned to a life of social ostracism, which he later likened to the situation of African-Americans in the United States.³ His conversion to Buddhism, which disclaimed caste, was a carefully planned remedy for the social distinctions so basic to Hinduism.

Rising through the schools the colonial British made available to a limited number of untouchables, Ambedkar gained recognition in Bombay, Maharashtra's great urban trade center, as a leader in the Mahar community's civil rights struggles. The first in the community to gain a college education, he eventually traveled to the United States where he took a doctorate in economics at Columbia University. Later, in Great Britain, he became a barrister, as Mohandas Gandhi had before him, and took a second doctorate from the London School of Economics. Returning to Bombay, Ambedkar threw himself into the politics of Maharashtra, winning a seat in Bombay's Legislative Assembly. In the midst of India's Independence struggle, Ambedkar rose as the leading champion

for the “depressed classes.” While outside of India it was Gandhi who became known as the untouchables' advocate, within India and among the untouchables it was Ambedkar who was recognized as their great leader. The roles played by Ambedkar and Gandhi in Indian history are comparable to those played by Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln in American history, both in politics and subsequently in the popular media.⁴

Within the freedom movement Ambedkar became the great advocate of secularism. Despite his continual struggle with Gandhi and the Indian National Congress over their inability to transcend Hinduism's continuing reliance upon caste and its implicit support of the concept of “untouchability,” he was able to maintain a political presence that allowed him to become the principal drafter of the Indian constitution and main source for that document's staunch secularism. He was also, in this role, responsible for choosing the non-brahmanic wheel and lion-capital symbols adorning the nation's flag and seal.

In 1935, despairing of Hinduism's inability to renounce the caste system and the stigma of untouchability, Ambedkar declared his intention to convert to a religion that did not endorse the heinous hierarchy. He “solemnly assured” the Depressed Classes Conference at Yeola, “that though I have been born Hindu, I will not die a Hindu.” He considered Christianity, Islam, Arya Samaj, and Sikhism, but from relatively early on his choice was Buddhism. While it had been virtually extinct in India for centuries, Buddhism was a traditional Indian faith, based upon suppositions familiar to every Indian. Besides rejecting caste, Buddhism was also a major world religion, with vast support in the nations surrounding India and high respect in India itself.⁵

On October 14, 1956, a decade after Independence and precisely two decades after his original declaration of his intention to convert, Ambedkar took his Buddhist *dīkṣā* (initiation) at Nagpur. On that day and the next he personally led the conversion of about one-half million who had come for that purpose. By the time of the 1961 census there were 3.25 million Buddhists in India. Millions more have converted since.⁶ For Ambedkar and his many associates and followers, the conversion was not merely a practical matter, but one of deep, psychological significance. They were rejecting a system that condemned them, but they were also committing themselves to an ideology that disputed the possibility of karma, transmigration, and a divine hierarchy by birth, embracing instead a faith that stressed the equality of all human beings. In repudiating the power and prestige of the brahmins and their creed, they were choosing an alternative that promised them progress without limits, that from the beginning rejected the idea of untouchability.⁷

Ambedkar's epithet, Maitreya, carried significance in the movement he founded, for Buddhist tradition held that after the death of the Śākyamuni (the historical Buddha) another Buddha, or Bodhisattva (perfectly enlightened being), called Maitreya would appear on earth to bring a renewed enlightenment.⁸ Significantly, Ambedkar's conversion coincided with a worldwide celebration of the Buddha's *Jayanti*, the twenty-five hundredth anniversary of Śākyamuni's enlightenment.⁹ As in this adoption of the epithet Maitreya, the new Buddhists¹⁰ have resurrected and revived a number of traditional Buddhist concepts and imageries. In the interest of exploring, defining, and legitimizing their Buddhist identity, they have also taken symbols and motifs from Buddhist imagery abroad and invented new imagery to fit their modern situation.

The reuse of Buddhist monuments of the past, with their powerful resonance in pan-Indian elite and popular culture, has been employed to sanction the new faith by enhancing its identification with established tradition. Beginning in the nineteenth century, British and Indian writers raised a laudatory literary and scholarly appreciation around the rediscovery of India's Buddhist past. The intellectual richness of this tradition and the aesthetic power of its magnificent remains elevated Indian Buddhism in the eyes of the British and of the outside world, and, consequently, of India's modern elite.

In adopting Buddhism, the Mahars and others who followed Ambedkar's lead became heirs to India's vast store of ancient Buddhist imagery. In much the same way that the Republic of India—also following

Ambedkar's lead—found peculiarly Indian, transcommunal symbols in the ancient Aśoka's four-lion standard and wheel, the Buddhists adopted an already established symbolism that expressed not only their aspirations for the future but their connection with a highly honored Indian past, providing them with a direct link to a significant portion of India's ancient remains. After centuries of denial of entry to temples and of association with the great events and monuments of the past on the basis of caste, they now claimed a great history of their own. Indeed, the Buddhists' monumental temple remains and stone sculpture are even older, and so, by some measure, more prestigious, than those of the brahmanical Hindus.¹¹

Thus in Maharashtra, where most of the new Buddhists are concentrated, they have



Figure 1 Cave 19, ca. 475. Ajanta, Maharashtra.

taken the world-renowned Buddhist monuments and imagery of the west Indian rock-cut temples as their own (fig. 1). Turning their backs on the Hindu temples from which they were for so long denied entrance, they have established a special interest in Karli, Ajanta, Ellora, and numerous other sites of major cultural significance and antiquity. Though they have not been able to take possession of these monuments, most of which are under the control of the Archaeological Survey of India, they have asserted their new identity with them through visits that amount to pilgrimage. In this way they gain the access to a cosmic identification denied them in many Hindu shrines.¹² One of my most vivid experiences in India was to witness Ellora's Viśvakarma *caitya*—a gray, twelve-century old aesthetic relic and one of India's best-known historical and tourist monuments—transformed into a living

rainbow of actualized faith by a gathering of local Buddhists. Here, the despised descendants of a glorious tradition endowed itself with a new legitimacy.

The vast store of ancient Buddhist imagery also serves as a source of emblems and decoration for both public monuments and private homes. Where in Hindu homes you will find *pūjā* (worship) rooms and decorative elements filled with deities and pictures of well-known Hindu monuments and in Muslim homes or shops, images of the Kaaba or Taj Mahal, in Buddhist homes you will find replicas of famous Buddhas and photographs of important monuments, such as Sanchi, Sarnath, and Bodhgaya. Already famous and commonly reproduced as India's national treasures, these monuments are once again peculiarly Buddhist. In Mahar homes, and even in some former community temples, Buddhist images have replaced those of Pandurang and Rukmabhai and other Hindu deities formerly honored, but never so truly available.¹³

It is important to recognize that these Buddhist images are not treated in the same way as the Hindu ones they have replaced. Ambedkar's rationalism goes further than many sorts of Buddhism in flatly denying the existence of gods, and so these images are taken, not as idols for offerings or devotion, but as representations of beings to be respected and emulated.¹⁴ The garlands placed upon them signify respect, not supplication.

A second source of ready-made imagery is the international Buddhist tradition, which has intensified its involvement in India over the past two centuries, as British colonial interests located important Buddhist sites and made them accessible. When the wealthy Birla family chose to build a Buddhist temple in Bombay in the early 1950s, the Japanese made available images and priests. The Buddhist conversion movement has found similar responses from surrounding Buddhist communities. I have seen Tibetan, Thai, Burmese, Japanese, and Sri Lankan images donated to various new Buddhist temples.¹⁵ A good example of this is the life-size, fiberglass seated Śākyamuni from Sri Lanka in the Shanti Vihāra at Nagpur (fig. 2). This imagery too serves strongly in terms of legitimation and identification. It allows the Buddhists to dignify their modest temples with luxurious and impressive images quite beyond their modest means. Whatever the theological viewpoint, this is an important issue for a largely impoverished community. More importantly perhaps, this usage offers a powerless minority community direct connections with a powerful international Buddhist world. As the new Buddhists identify themselves by and with these finely crafted images and the creed for which they stand, they also

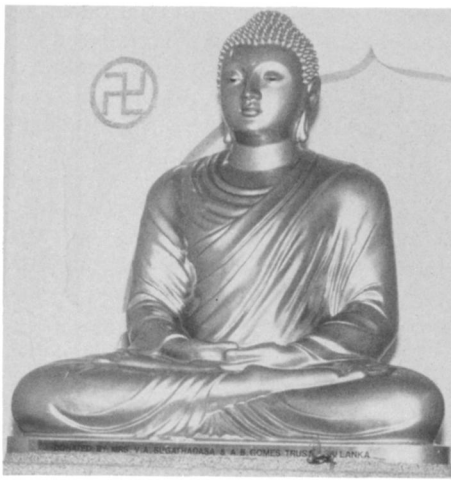


Figure 2 *Śākyamuni Buddha in Meditation*, ca. 1975, fiberglass, donated by the V. A. Sugathadasa and A. B. Gomes Trust, Sri Lanka, to the Shanti Vihāra, Shantivana, Nagpur.

identify themselves with the international success and power of that world, through the actual possession of these images.¹⁶

More interesting than these uses of past or imported imagery, however, is the new imagery that serves to express these new Buddhists' particular history and aspirations. This art allows a more direct manifestation of the community's creativity, and harnesses that creativity to one of art's most significant potentials, its ability to explore identity. If the adoption of traditional Buddhist forms allows the community to signal its identification with that tradition and to legitimize itself through this prestigious connection, the creation of new imagery allows it to explore its interests and destiny as a modern Indian community struggling for its place in the second-half of the twentieth century.

Public Buddhist monuments are mostly images of the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni, Ambedkar, and Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (the nineteenth-century Maharashtrian leader regarded as Ambedkar's major predecessor). These statues in the new imagery are found at crossroads, public squares, and the entrances to Buddhist neighborhoods or institutions, in the same kinds of places we are used to seeing other major national figures, such as Gandhi, Śivaji, and Subas Candra Bose. The Ambedkar statues indicate the presence of the people who have chosen to transform their lives through his teachings.

The style of these monuments varies greatly from a highly perceptual to a more generalized realism, depending upon the nature of the patronage. The monuments in front of the Lok Sabha (Parliament) in New Delhi and the old Secretariat building in Bombay are realistic works in bronze. Those by the roadside in Karnataka and

Maharashtra are blander, and often cruder, popular productions in plaster or concrete. Whether the variations in style have more to do with the availability of funds or intentional choice is not yet clear to me. It is possible that thirty-five years do not provide a long enough history to develop the variety of alternatives from which a conscious choice can be made. Nor is there a centralized authority to codify stylistic or iconographic design. As in the past, style is essentially a matter of region, era, and economic support, not of ideology. Most modern Buddhist art shares the same generalized naturalism of bright colors and somewhat stylized features common to other popular imagery in India.

A typical monumental portrait of Ambedkar can be seen on the highway leading north from Aurangabad to Ajanta (fig. 3). In the spirit of India's traditional religious imagery of the past two thousand years, where such images have much the same style and iconography regardless of where they are located, Ambedkar is presented as a man in a blue business suit, white shirt, and red tie, with a fountain pen in his pocket and a book in his hand. He is bare-headed, his dark hair neatly combed down, and he wears a pair of black-rimmed spectacles. He stands squarely in what the ancient iconographic texts called *sam-abhaṅga*, or no bends. In the context of Indian religious imagery, this figure makes three points: this is a city man, a man of learning, and *only* a man—not a god.

As a Westerner who first saw this image in the mid-1960s, I found the style immediately called to mind contemporaneous American Pop art, with its use of blandly simplified realism, brightly colored surfaces, and deadpan expression. But this is how the uninitiated usually respond to things they don't understand, explaining them by distorting them into versions of things they do know. For Buddhists and other people living in Maharashtra, the image is a simple but clear expression of the Mahar's own modest yet cosmic desires and potentiality. Here, those who had been forbidden a public presence announce both their presence and their newly claimed right to a place at the center of creation, by displaying an image of the Bombay statesman who pled their cause before the world and taught them that they were more than the "children of god," or *Harijans*, as Gandhi called them. They are the followers of Babasaheb Ambedkar. The garland around the statue's neck is not part of its structure but something added by his respectful followers. Like the image's fresh coat of paint, the garland indicates the community's active presence.

The relatively standardized iconography has only existed for a few short decades and has yet to be fixed in a text. Ambedkar's blue business suit is as regular

as Śākyamuni Buddha's orange *samghātī* robe—I have never seen another garment or color used¹⁷—and it is as meaningful. Where the *samghātī*'s patchwork of rags stands for Śākyamuni's presence as a wandering beggar, the blue suit indicates a man of modern education and civic status. The book in his hand augments this concept: the enlightened one of the modern era rejects the hierarchies of the past, handed down in canonical texts that the lower castes and outcastes were forbidden to hear, see, or teach. Instead, faith is placed in modern secular learning and civil disputation open to all. When the book is identified, it as the Indian constitution, sometimes it is labeled "Bharat" (India), but it can also be taken more generally to represent the value Ambedkar and the community place upon education and the secular culture of the cities.

Most often Ambedkar stands with one leg slightly advanced as if walking, his arm raised and index finger extended as if pointing (fig. 4). This particular gesture, which seems to have no narrowly agreed upon definition within the community as yet, does seem to have a generally understood significance. To his followers, Ambedkar's hand gesture stands for oratory or teaching, both activities with which he is



Figure 3 Ambedkar statue, ca. 1960. Facing west on Ajanta Road, north of Aurangabad.

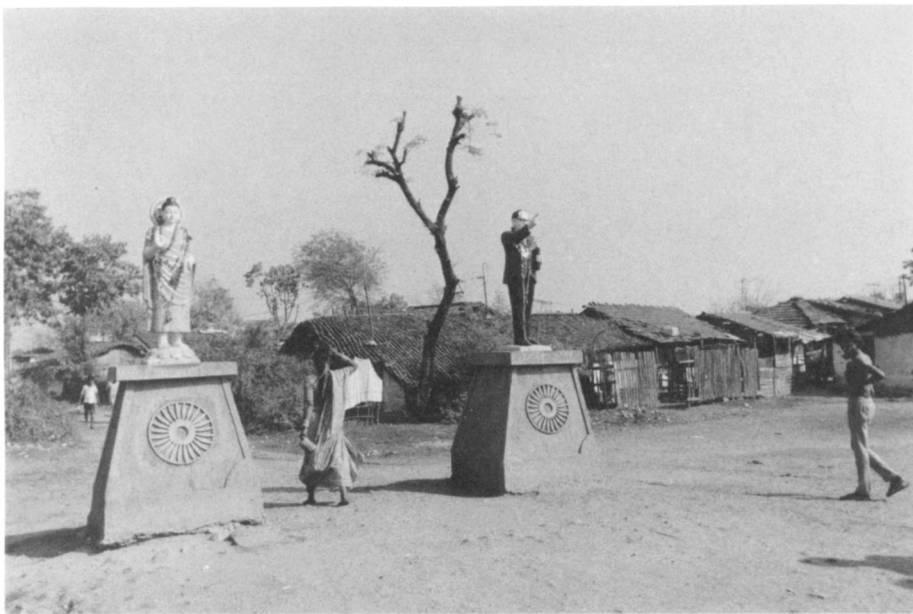


Figure 4 Ambedkar and Śākyamuni Buddha statues at the entrance to the Tarodi Settlement, Nagpur.



Figure 5 B. G. Sharma, Śrī Ambedkar, ca. 1960, chromolithograph.

popularly associated. Indeed, Ambedkar's *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, the bible of the new movement, has a line drawing of this very hand pose on each page. It is, apparently, the new gesture, or *mudrā*, of teaching.¹⁸

This image of a Bombay lawyer is in striking contrast to the standard Hindu god depicted in the traditional garb of *dhoti* or *sari*, with multiple limbs and fantastic attributes. The contemporary Buddhist imagery combines elements of past art with new features, connecting past traditions with a distinctly different present and future. Seeing Ambedkar's image in tandem with the more traditional one of



Figure 6 Dalit Panther poster, December 1988. Bombay.

Śākyamuni, as they are regularly shown, emphasizes just this juxtaposition (figs. 4, 5, and 10). Following the rationalism of Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhist doctrine, his portraits emphasize his humanity. In this vision, we return to one of the earliest attitudes of Buddhist theology, which claims that the Buddha is not a god but an enlightened man. Pictorializing the issue proclaims it.

In the Ambedkar image's formal pose, and in the repetition of the pose and iconography, we see a construction of the formal identity of Indian traditional art. Thus the Ambedkar image is not only identifiable but comparable with the icons of the

hegemonic traditions. Variations in its form have been elaborated to explore its meaning. One Ambedkar image in Aurangabad, for instance, has beneath it a wheel flanked by seated deer, a familiar composition from ancient art of nearby Ajanta, symbolizing the wheel of the law put into motion by Śākyamuni's first teaching in the deer park at Sarnath. Though the intent here seems to be projection of Ambedkar as a teacher, it also likens him to Śākyamuni.

The least expensive and so most popular of all religious images in India are the ubiquitous chromolithographs made by the Sharmas and their competitors, which include images of every sect and popular hero.¹⁹ Among these images, which are created for Buddhists by artists who are not themselves Buddhists, we find Buddha, Ambedkar (fig. 5), and Phule. Ambedkar is here shown in a sympathetic bust portrait, an ethereal vision of Śākyamuni Buddha with one hand raised in the *abhaya* gesture for dispelling fear floating behind him.

A poster using Ambedkar's photograph to call a mass civil rights rally in downtown Bombay also has images of an ancient Bodhisattva and a black panther (fig. 6). It links the contemporary Buddhist movement to its international history through the eighth-century Bodhisattva from Thailand²⁰ and to an international civil rights movement through the 1960s and seventies iconography of the American Black Panther party.²¹ The Dalit Panthers, who sponsored the rally, are a politicized movement of the left, composed largely of Buddhists. This combination of images indicates the Buddhists' exploration of their identity and potential. While some more conservative Buddhists might reject the panther symbol, some Marxist Dalits might reject the Bodhisattva. In this poster, the polarities of the community are embraced. This is more than just quotation and combination of ancient and contemporary imagery; it is conscious exploration of the Buddhist community's identity and of the meaning of the Buddhism it is developing.

The site of Ambedkar's funeral pyre, or *samādhi*, on the beach at Dadar, in Bombay, is marked by a domed memorial in a small garden. Pilgrimage is common and a particularly large *darsan*, or witness, is held each year on December 6, the anniversary of his "death" (fig. 7). The Ambedkar Memorial Shrine, which amounts to what in Buddhist terminology is called a *caitya* or *stūpa*, combines traditional and modern elements. The most striking traditional elements are the half-round dome rising from a square platform, and the *torana* gateway (arches) on the south and north of the platform. The relatively squat proportions of the wall supporting the dome possibly relate to the relief imagery of ancient

stūpas in central India,²² and the square platform may refer to the *stūpas* of ancient India's northwest.²³ The gateways, on the other hand, are similar to those depicted in reliefs from both central and southern regions of ancient India.²⁴ The design is, in any case, not a copy of older imagery but a new synthesis.

Beyond these general forms and proportions, similarities with past structures cease. The body of this *stūpa*, like many, if not most, religious structures built in India today, is constructed in reinforced concrete, rather than the traditional brick or stone. This new and structurally liberating medium has allowed the creation of a *stūpa* type largely unknown to historians of Indian art.²⁵ Unlike the ancient *stūpas*, which are nearly all solid masses, the Ambedkar *caitya* is a hollow, inhabitable shell, containing chambers with figurative imagery as well as a portion of Ambedkar's ashes, which can be seen through openings in the dome and base and approached directly.

The other great site of the new Buddhist geography, the location of Ambedkar's conversion and the first mass conversion, is the Diksha Bhumi (conversion ground) at Nagpur. A great *stūpa* hall is currently under construction there.²⁶ Perhaps it would be more useful to see this as a hall containing a *stūpa*. There is a model of the structure, designed by the architect Sheo Dan Mal, at the site (fig. 8). Its extremely low base, upper walkway, and flatter profile resemble the ancient *stūpas* of Sanchi (fig. 9) and Amaravati. It also has northern style *torāṇa* and a number of rather new features such as an embanked, grassy platform and corner fountains.

This is a great *stūpa*-shaped auditorium for mass community gatherings. While the old *stūpas* are sites commemorating the great events of the Buddha's life, relics of the faith, or, most often, the Buddha's passing, these new *stūpas* are sites for staging the new Buddhists' future. At Nagpur, the hall's basement contains living spaces for *bhikkhus* (members of the monastic brotherhood) and smaller meeting rooms, which are marked on the exterior by the windows lining the embanked basement. Although the arched form of the windows refers to the traditional past, the very presence of windows indicates the transformation of the *stūpa*'s content. At the center of the structure at basement level, a small *stūpa* marks the spot of the great conversion, another connection with the past. The current needs and interests of the Buddhists, however, are represented by new forms that shape a different future. Commemorating the original conversion, Diksha Bhumi Day, one of the community's four great annual observances, has its major ceremony here.

Another kind of building constructed by

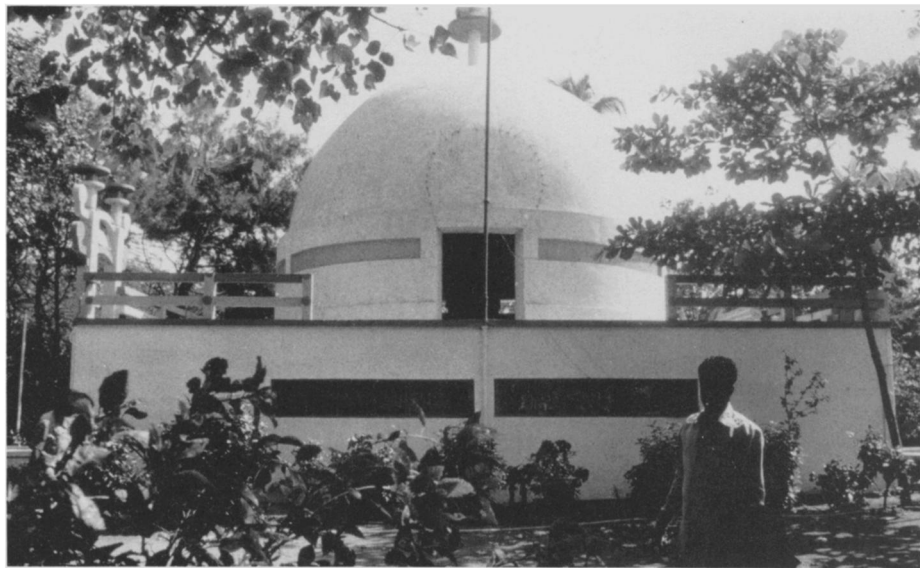


Figure 7 Ambedkar Memorial Shrine. Śivaji Park, Dadar, Bombay.

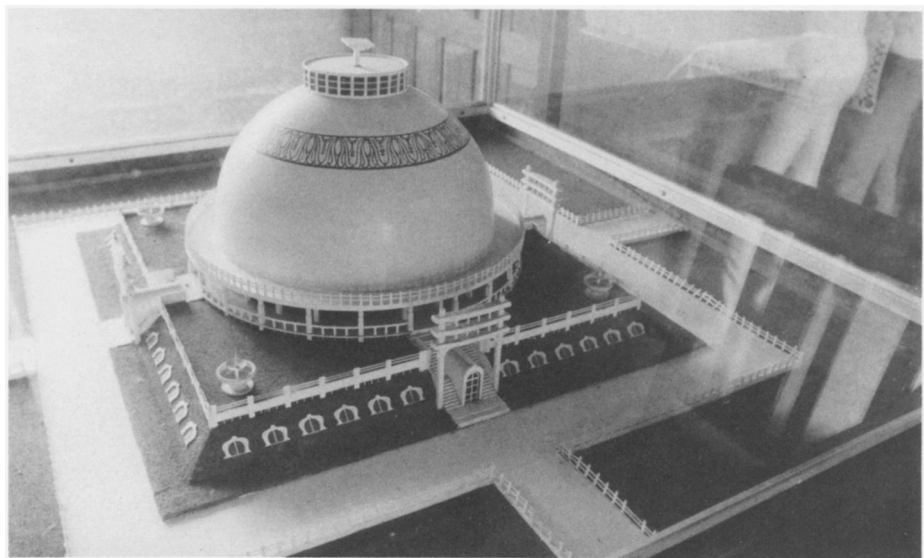


Figure 8 Model of Babasaheb Ambedkar Memorial Complex, designed by Sheo Dan Mal. Diksha Bhumi, Nagpur (begun 1982).

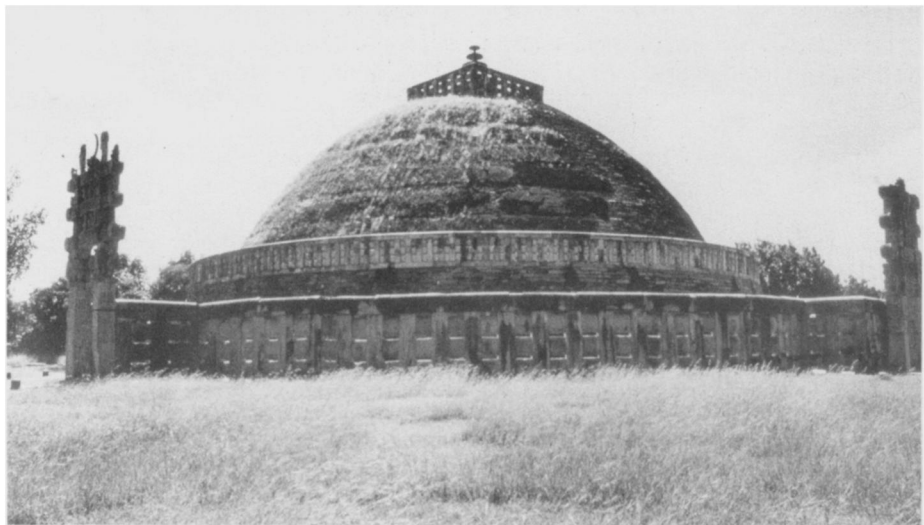


Figure 9 Great Stūpa, 1st century B.C.E.–.C.E. Sanchi.



Figure 10 Interior. Triratna Buddha Vihāra, Hanuman Nagar Government Colony, Bombay.

the community are meeting halls, which it calls *vihāras*. While the term *vihāras* traditionally referred to monastic dormitories, and *bhikkhus* still sometimes stay in them, this is not their main function today. Nor are *vihāras* temples, which they resemble with their images of deities at one end and even towers over these deities. The common Marathi terms for temple, *mandir* and *deūl*, are carefully avoided when speaking of *vihāras*.²⁷ The new *vihāras* differ significantly from the Buddhist temples built by the Mahābodhi Society at Sarnath or the Birla family at Bombay, which resemble the temples of the ancient past. Indeed, these *vihāras* have a different purpose altogether.

Like the Diksha Bhumi hall, *vihāras* are gathering places that contain commemorative imagery. The images placed at the end of the hall resemble the sanctum images of the Hindu temple, but here they are part of the human space, not separated in a chamber for ritual purity, with attending priests. People do not pray or make vows to these images; they are memorials, not icons. Some may have rooms for *bhikkhus*, but the *bhikkhus*' purpose is to instruct and lead the community, not to attend the images.

Vihāras present a visual imagery that requires care to read. Though not worship halls, they take a form that is only slightly different, encompassing altarlike platforms and images. The apparent contradictions seem heightened when we witness a scene approximating worship, such as the one shown in Triratna Buddha Vihāra in Bombay (fig. 10). Here is a community in the progress of transformation. The com-

mon Indian form of the temple hall, altar, and worshiper have been altered only slightly, but the change is highly significant. In a Tibetan context, the Tibetan Buddha image on this altar would be worshiped with devotional faith; in another era, the *bhikkhu* would be a priest or a worshiper and the woman holding the incense would be praying. But in this context, where the ideology of devotion is explicitly rejected and an ideology of rationalized action is proclaimed, the woman standing between the ancient imagery of the Buddha on one side and the modern imagery of Ambedkar before Parliament on the other is offering homage not worship. Old forms are transformed by new meanings.

The *vihāras* are used for community meetings and functions of all sorts, from Buddhist education and political action to pre-school. The Buddhist teachings offered there, called *vaṇḍana*, are memorial services centered on the Pali texts of the Theravāda canon. Since they are not worship services, they are never called by common terms like *pūjā*, used to designate worship. For the most part, they are led by lay people, men and women. Discussions begin with an honoring of the Buddha and Ambedkar, but not a call for their blessings.

The Shanti Vihāra, at Shantivana, on the outskirts of Nagpur, shows the same contradictions (fig. 11). A modest brick structure finished in brightly painted plaster, it has a gathering hall with one image at the far end, surrounded by rooms for the *bhikkhus* and others who may reside or meet there. Unlike most *vihāras*, it has the tower

that marks the traditional Indian temple, here assuming the form of a small *stūpa*. And indeed it is intended to house relics of the Śākyamuni Buddha, which have been donated to the Shantivana complex. The forms are thus not so unlike those of a Hindu temple. It is clearly a religious structure, with which all Indians are familiar.²⁸ But the use of the building is to link the messages of Ambedkar and the Buddha, and to transform former habits of supplication into those of social action. W. M. Godbole, a long-time associate of Ambedkar's and organizer of the great *diksha*, is the *vihāra*'s designer. It is part of an as yet unfinished seminary complex for training *bhikkhus* in the evangelical work of spreading Ambedkar's message, in which social transformation takes a religious form.

Finally, an aspect of the new Buddhist art we need to consider is the work of individual artists and designers. Ram Tirpude, a local Nagpur artist and perhaps the first new Buddhist artist, began the community's aesthetic activity by giving already existing imagery a new Buddhist use. Tirpude designed the stage at the Diksha Bhumi for the original conversion with materials at hand to fashion a miniature of the Sanchi *stūpa* as a canopy over the heads of Ambedkar and his associates.

The common situation of Buddhist artists today is seen in the work of P. B. Ramteke. The most popular Buddhist works are portraits of Ambedkar, either taken from the original or based on surviving likenesses in photographs. Ramteke's *Babasaheb Ambedkar* of 1987 falls into the latter category. An oil painting based on a photograph, it shows the familiar bespectacled face, with only parts of the coat and tie. More personal than some images, intensely human, it is unquestionably a successful attempt to bring out the acutely penetrating, yet compassionate gaze of the young man who would become a Maitreya for his community and modern India. The original oil was done as the basis for a widely available, inexpensive color lithograph (fig. 12).

This community-oriented, inspirational art is the equivalent of the traditional art of solidarity and identity found in most religions or political movements in the world. Artists may express themselves either personally or impersonally in this vein, indeed, the B. G. Sharma lithograph (fig. 5) and other commercial works, as we have seen, may be by artists who are not themselves Buddhists. The primary point of these works is what they say, not how or who says it. This is an art of community, of emblems of identification with group ideals. It stands in distinct contrast to the individualist art of the gallery world of the bourgeois cities.



Figure 11 Shanti Vihāra, designed by W. M. Godbole. Shantivana, Nagpur.



Figure 13 P. B. Ramteke, *Joy of Unity*, 1987, oil on canvas, 30 × 36 inches. Private collection.

In the case of Ramteke, we have an academically trained artist with a gallery career quite separate from his religious art. In his gallery art Ramteke may occasionally, but only subtly, reveal elements of his Buddhist orientation. While his Buddhist art is naturalistic and communal, his gallery art is essentially abstract and personal in both form and content.

Ramteke sees his gallery work as having developed in stages over the years from a colorful diagrammatic style in the surrealist vein of Paul Klee or Joan Miró—both of whose influences he cites with alacrity—to increasingly abstract formulations. The stage he reached in 1988 and 1989, he feels expresses his independence from models and his most particular vision. Of the three dozen works of his I have seen, only *Joy of Unity* (fig. 13) of 1987 has an identifiable Buddhist content. An essentially abstract design of colorful insect, reptile, and birdlike shapes flickering about a reticulated plane of grays and whites, the work on closer inspection reveals a statement on the harmony of India's religions. The dark rectangle at the bottom represents a structure decked with motifs symbolizing India's different faiths: a trident for Saivism, a cross for Christianity, and a half-moon for Islam. These forms are contained within a curving gray form recognizable as the outline of a Buddhist *stūpa* that unites the other religions. In India, as everywhere in the modern bourgeois world, gallery art is essentially personal and decorative. To succeed in that world, religious artists must leave their social interests relatively obscured.

The study of this new Buddhist art offers a variety of useful insights, not the least of which help us to understand earlier Buddhist art. Since ancient India's Buddhist traditions came to an end without leaving a literature explaining its beliefs, it is difficult to interpret a great deal of the symbolism and instrumentality of the remains. The presence of this new Buddhist tradition suggests alternative readings for many items about which we now can only speculate. It can offer expressive interpretations for objects and texts whose functional context we have lost. More important, it can provide evidence of a flu-

idity of possible meanings in contrast to the limited ones offered by a literal reading of texts.

Finally, and most significantly, the new Buddhist imagery gives us a genuine revolutionary art. In a discipline that spends much of its effort considering whether or not selected imagery is "revolutionary," or emblematic of change, or even a facilitator of change, here is an art that is an instrument of social change of the most vital kind. India's new Buddhists are a community in the process of a profound revolutionary change, which is using visual imagery as a major means to accomplish that transformation.

Normally, when we speak of revolutionary artistic forms in Western art criticism or history we refer to formal novelty. Art that has a technically unusual surface form—a new decorative style, more often than not—we term revolutionary. The changes involved are significant only in the world of aesthetic decoration and elite cultural discourse. Most likely they involve no development in meaning and certainly none in the social or material reality of their producers and consumers—their creators and buyers, if you will. This use of the concept of a revolutionary art is largely a matter of inflated rhetoric.

The art of these new Buddhists is different in two ways. First, it is an art stylistically and pictorially conventional in the extreme. There is no formal novelty. Changes from the past are essentially matters of content. Second, it is an art of social and material transformation, a significant tool in the transformation of Indian culture



Figure 12 P. B. Ramteke, *Babasaheb Ambedkar*, 1988, photo offset reproduction of original oil painting, 15 × 17 inches. Private collection.

and society. The identities it portrays are precisely those being used by the Buddhist community to reshape its psychology and reorient its social and material life. To the degree that it recognizes the Buddhist personality and focuses energy on new and different statuses and material possibilities via education, election, and conversion, the new Buddhist art is a materially powerful and socially significant instrument for change.

This may not be the usual way to speak of revolutionary art, but we have so thoroughly lost track of our basic meanings, and taken the analogy of Pablo Picasso's and Jackson Pollock's "revolutionary" transformations of decorative vocabulary so seriously, that it is refreshing to have a genuine revolutionary imagery to remind us of the difference between the analogy and the real thing and to point up how much time we spend on the trivial imagery,

which our wealthy compete to possess, and how little time on the imagery that defines our living reality.

Gary Michael Tartakov teaches history of art and design at Iowa State University. He is currently finishing a book on the Durga temple and the history of Indian art history.

Notes

- 1 I owe a great debt to Eleanor Zelliott and Vasant Moon for my introduction to Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Buddhist movement, and for my access to the new Buddhist art. I also wish to thank S. K. Thorat for his discussions with me and particularly for a number of important suggestions he made after reading a draft of this paper.
- 2 For a good general survey and explanation of the development of India's ancient Buddhist art, see Susan and John Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India* (New York: Weatherhill, 1985).
- 3 Ambedkar lived on the edge of Harlem while attending Columbia University. His writings include numerous comparisons of India's untouchables and American Blacks. The most comprehensive biography is Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, 2nd ed. (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962).
- 4 Eleanor Zelliott, "Gandhi and Ambedkar," in Michael Mahar, ed., *Untouchables in Contemporary India* (Phoenix: University of Arizona Press, 1972), 69–95.
- 5 Eleanor Zelliott, "Religion and Legitimation in the Mahar Movement," in Bardwell Smith, ed., *Religion and the Legitimation of Power in South Asia* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), 88–105.
- 6 Since the 1990 Parliament has readmitted those converting to Buddhism to eligibility for the Scheduled Caste reservations in education, government jobs, etc., that they had previously lost upon conversion, this number is expected to double; see *Times of India*, May 8, 1990.
- 7 Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism is supremely rational and relatively distinct from the many other schools and sects now in existence. Its prime text is his posthumously published *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, 2nd ed. (Bombay: Siddharth Publications, 1974). Ambedkar's interpretations are compared with others in Joanna Rogers Macy and Eleanor Zelliott, "Tradition and Innovation in Contemporary Indian Buddhism," in *Studies in the History of Buddhism*, ed. A. K. Narain (Delhi: B. R. Publishing Co., 1980), 133–53, and in S. R. Goyal, *A History of Indian Buddhism* (Meerut: Kusumanjali Prakashan, 1987), 412–23.
- 8 Though "Hindu" is a common synonym in English for later brahmanism or brahmanical Hinduism, particularly in the colloquial English words that differentiate among Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism in India, the term is misleading. In India and in some cases in the United States, "Hindu" is commonly taken as "Indian," although Jains, for instance, consider themselves to be as Hindu as anyone else. To consider these other Indian religions non-Hindu should not suggest that there is something non-Indian about them.
- 9 The international Buddha Jayanti, marking twenty-five hundred years after Śākyamuni's enlightenment (or his birth or nirvāṇa, depending on your source), was celebrated in India, Sri Lanka, and around the world in 1956. Since the Buddhist calendar and its dates, like the Christian, are disputed, all Buddhists do not agree precisely on the same dates for these events. Nor do all new Buddhists feel comfortable with the title Maitreya for Ambedkar, some seeing this as a Mahāyāna concept, which does not fit their more Theravāda vision.
- 10 Some have called them new Buddhists or neo-Buddhists, but many among them resent the implication that they are less authentic than other Buddhist sects. Keer reports Ambedkar telling reporters on the evening before his conversion that what he was initiating was a "neo-Buddhism or Navayān[a]" (Keer, *Ambedkar*, 495).
- 11 One of the most interesting facts of Indian art history is the early avoidance of permanent materials by the brahmanical worshippers. There exists Buddhist art in significant amounts from the third century B.C.E., but little brahmanical art in stone before the third century C.E.
- 12 Though the practice of untouchability was outlawed soon after Independence, and entrance to public temples guaranteed to all and enforced by civil authorities, there is still in actuality a good amount of discrimination. Seventy-one percent of villages bar former untouchables from local Hindu temples according to the 1978–79 *Report of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes*. In the numerous private temples, civil codes do not require openness.
- 13 This includes even deities such as Mātāmāyā, the Mahar smallpox goddess, which belonged to the untouchable community rather than to the brahmins and to which there was never a bar.
- 14 Macy and Zelliott, "Tradition and Innovation," 146.
- 15 A Tibetan image occupies the central place at the Triratna Buddha Vihāra, Bhandra East, Bombay (fig. 10). There is a life-size Thai bronze image in Nagpur's Indra Buddha Vihār. A Burmese image sits on a small altar at the Shantivana, next to the reliquary with Ambedkar's relics, Nagpur. A Japanese image can be found in Nagpur's Ananda Vihāra.
- 16 There is commonly, as in the Shanti Vihāra image, a dedicatory inscription giving the name of the donor.
- 17 The recent dedication of a portrait in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of the Indian Parliament in New Delhi) showing Ambedkar in the long caftan often worn by Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, was met with instant criticism by his followers. It was not because of lack of proof that he had on occasion worn such a garment in his days as a cabinet minister—photographs of him dressed in a caftan were, in fact, the basis for the painting—but because this was not the way the Buddhists want him memorialized. See *Times of India*, April 19 and 28 (with a picture), 1990.
- 18 The Japanese *bhikkhu* at Ananda Vihāra in Nagpur calls it *Prajña Tarowar*, or sword of knowledge. Eleanor Zelliott's phrase "pointing toward enlightenment" fits what I have heard many Buddhists say.
- 19 It is not at all uncommon in India to have one community create images for another.
- 20 The fact that it is a specifically Thai image seems to carry no significance. Its presence refers more to Buddhism's ancient and international history.
- 21 The Dalit (literally, oppressed) Panthers took part of their name from the Black Panther Party for Self-Defence in the late 1960s. See Janet Conrursi, "Militant Hindus and Buddhist Dalits: Hegemony and Resistance in an Indian Slum," *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 3 (1989): 441–57.
- 22 Heinrich Zimmer, *The Arts of Indian Asia* (New York: Pantheon, 1955), vol. 2, pl. 18.
- 23 E.g., Huntington, *Ancient India*, pl. 8.8.
- 24 Such images from Sanchi and Amaravati can be seen in Heinrich Zimmer, *Indian Asia*, vol. 2, pls. 10 and 91.
- 25 The form, which is not as rare as modern historians tend to assume, has essentially not been discussed in modern studies, however. For a comparable image of a Buddhist temple in a Gandharan relief in the Lahore Museum, see Heinrich Gerhard Franz, *Buddhistische Kunst Indiens* (Leipzig: E. A. Seemann, 1965), pl. 209.
- 26 *Stūpas* are raised to enshrine three sorts of relics: bits of scripture, the remains of those who have achieved enlightenment (such as Ambedkar), and great sites of the faith, such as this one.
- 27 Macy and Zelliott, "Tradition and Innovation," 146.
- 28 The Christian theological seminary at Tumkur makes similar use of a towered-temple form for its chapel, with the same purpose of displaying an appropriate shape for an Indian religious structure.